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ABSTRACT

Parents have a vital role to play in their children's literacy education, but too often schools have been the domain of teachers, and have offered opportunities for parental involvement that are little more than token efforts. Parent involvement is important for parents' and their children's learning, and is useful in facilitating changes in schools and teachers that will enable educators to be more responsive to community needs. Some schools adopt a narrow definition of parent involvement which focuses primarily on what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families. This paper describes a variety of ways in which teachers can involve and communicate with parents in the following areas: (1) school policies and procedures; (2) curriculum information; (3) classroom information; (4) student feedback; and (5) parental support of their children. Specific strategies discussed include involving parents in the development of literacy policies and procedures within a school by having parent representation on curriculum committees; and providing parents with details on classroom literacy programs and practices by inviting parents to visit the classroom. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

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PARENTS, OUR SILENT PARTNERS

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Keynote address to the second joint national conference of the Australian Reading Association and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English

Hobart, 24-27 September, 1992

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PARENTS, OUR SILENT PARTNERS*

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is something of a truism to state that parents have a vital part to play in their children's education. We know from practical experience, and extensive research, that parents are children's first teachers. From birth they introduce children to the mysteries of language, as they seek to communicate with them, and jointly make sense of their shared world. The parent's role in this is as a listener, prompter, information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker interested in the communication process (Cairney, 1989a; 1989b; 1990; Lindfors, 1985; Snow, 1983; Wells, 1983; 1986).

But it seems that the parent's influence does not magically cease at age five. Research has found that school factors (e.g. resources, class sizes, classroom organization and methods) account for only a minor proportion of variability in student achievement at school (Hanushek, 1981; Jencks et al., 1972 & Thompson, 1985). Differences in family backgrounds appear to account for a large share of variance in student achievement. Some have gone as far as to suggest that the cumulative effect of a range of home related factors, probably accounts for the greatest proportion of variability in student literacy performance (Rutter, Tizzard & Witmore, 1970; Thompson, 1985).

Another consistent research finding is that specific cultural groups experience greater success at school (Heath, 1983). But why? The answer seems to lie in the definitions of literacy that dominate and are encouraged in our schools. The reality is that schools staffed by middle class teachers, reflect middle class culturally defined views of what literacy is, and how it is best developed. It takes little effort to determine why specific cultural groups experience difficulties coping with literacy in such contexts. As Bourdieu (1977) has pointed out, schools inconsistently tap the social and cultural resources of society; privileging specific groups by emphasizing particular linguistic styles, curricula and authority patterns.

One way in which these basic cultural influences can be minimized is by involving parents more closely in school education. The purpose in breaking down the barriers between home and school is not to coerce, or even persuade, parents to take on the literacy definitions held by teachers. Rather, it is to enable both teachers and parents to understand the way each defines, values and uses literacy as part of cultural practices. In this way schooling can be adjusted to meet the needs of families. Parents in turn can also be given the opportunity to observe and understand the definitions of literacy schools support, and which ultimately empower individuals to take their place in society.

Parents are not simply a minor part of the educational process; some variable to be considered and addressed. There seem to be many conceptualizations of the parent's role in schooling. Some see parents as 'keepers' who ensure that children are well fed, loved, and groomed and sent to school to be adequately 'trained' each day. Others, see parents as home based 'warders' ensuring that standards of behaviour are conformed to, good habits set, and school related tasks completed. Another view seems to be that parents are meant to be compliant 'apprentices' working with children at school (as helpers), and at home on a range of simple, but effective training tasks.

All of these views have several things in common. First, they assume that parents have only a limited responsibility in relation to their children as learners. Second, they assume that the school is the site of the 'main game.' Third, they offer parents only a token role in children's education.

In contrast to such views, is an alternative which sees learning as a social process which has its beginnings in the meaning based relationship that parents establish with their children. The home provides both the beginning and foundation for learning. It is because of this that parent participation and partnership is essential.

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* Parts of this paper will appear in a forthcoming book to be published by ARA, *Beyond Tokenism: Parents as Partners in Literacy* (with L. Munsie)

2. PARENT PARTICIPATION

Attempts to bring schools and communities closer together have taken many forms, and at times have been anything but helpful. Bruner (1980, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) has pointed out that parent involvement in schooling is often a "dustbin term" which can mean all things to all people. Potter also points out that parent involvement programmes are often "shallow, ineffectual, confusing, and frustrating to both parents and teachers" (Briggs & Potter, 1990).

One of the reasons for the failure of some programmes is that many teachers have negative attitudes about parents and parent involvement. These teachers sometimes claim that parents are apathetic, and come to school only to criticize (Briggs & Potter, 1990). These teacher attitudes appear to be particularly prevalent when the parents are from lower socio-economic groups.

Others have suggested that the failure of some programmes to attract parental interest, may be due to parents not feeling competent to deal with school work. As well, it has been argued that this phenomenon may reflect the fact that these parents feel insecure in the school setting, and fearful about participation in the learning of their children (Moles, 1982; Greenberg, 1989).

As Mavrogenes (1990) points out, teachers and principals may need to question the assumption that low-income parents do not care about their children's education. It is likely that most parents are willing to help with their children's education, but many may have little idea concerning how to provide this help.

Halsey and Midwinter (1972, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) have argued that the best way to overcome some of these problems and to empower working class students, is to change the nature of education to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to gain power over their own community. This they argue requires the transformation of primary schools into focal points for their communities, thus bringing teachers and parents closer together, and leading subsequently to changed attitudes on the part of both parties. These schools it is argued should aim to develop self-esteem and provide students with power over their lives.

Unfortunately, some schools have adopted a very narrow definition of parent involvement, which primarily seeks to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families. This view is often evidenced by parents filling a variety of unpaid teacher aide or custodial roles.

Parents must be viewed as equal partners. There must be a reciprocal relationship. We need to go beyond token involvement and recognize the vital role that parents play in education. As Kruger & Mahon (1990, p. 4) point out, "parental involvement in literacy learning has much greater value than as an add-on to what teachers do".

3. IMPLEMENTING A VARIETY OF PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES

As Figure 1 shows, there are a variety of ways in which we can involve and communicate with parents. All schools use some of these strategies, but few could claim to have gone far with partnership initiatives. In the rest of this paper, I want to discuss some of strategies that schools can use to involve parents as partners. I want to discuss that these initiatives in five main content areas:

* School policies and procedures
* Curriculum information
* Classroom information
* Student feedback
* Parental support of their children

Figure 1 about here

It is my belief that it is only by implementing some of these options, that we begin to break down the barriers that create an artificial and damaging division between home and school.

a) School policies and procedures

One of the frequent problems schools face is that they are often promoting educational ideas that are not part of the wider community's experience. As a result, virtually all teachers at some time are confronted by parents who question the literacy practices that are being implemented.

While schools can simply continue on with their practices, and ignore parents, this is hardly productive. A much better approach is to involve parents in the development of literacy policies and procedures within the school. The following are just some of the ways you can involve parents:

* When setting up school committees to develop new curriculum initiatives have parent representation.
* Provide access to current educational debate in summary form for all parents. Schools might initiate a series of one page "Discussion Starters" on topics of interest, e.g. "What is Whole Language?" "What's a Genre - do you eat, it, or spray it?" "What's all the fuss about grammar?" "Was there really a 'Golden Age' when literacy standards were higher?"
* Involve parents in committees set up to purchase new books.

The above ideas are hardly new, and some will comment, "I've tried all that and no-one is interested." But it is important to counter this legitimate criticism by pointing out that while some parents do not show an active interest in broader educational issues, that all will show interest if they can see how it has an impact on their own children.

Furthermore, there is no point providing some of the above opportunities if it is simply tokenistic involvement. Such strategies must be used within the context of a total commitment to parent participation. Parents will not participate if they perceive that their involvement is not genuinely wanted. The following comment shows why one of the parents in a parent literacy programme (Cairney & Munsie, 1992), stayed away from school for many years:

> "Because my eldest is nearly 25, there was none of this sort of thing when he went to school. The schools weren't open to schools except on Education Day, and maybe sports' day. You weren't encouraged to interfere. You couldn't go up and ask the teacher what was wrong, or how could you help or something, you were virtually told - you know - more or less, that we're the teacher, you're only the mother (Lynne)."

b) Curriculum Information

While there is a place for information sheets, and parent handbooks, most written documents have little widespread impact. The reality of our age is that most people lead busy lives. As a result, most parents are very selective about the things they read. If leaflets and information booklets ever escape the fungus layer at the bottom of children's bags, they typically end up in the bin after a few neglected days on the kitchen table. Another reason for this fate being met is that information leaflets suffer from a number of key problems:

* Often they contain too much information.
* Language frequently contains a great deal of jargon.
* The tone is regularly patronising, e.g. "Our aim is to help you to be a better parent."
* The design and layout is often of poor quality.
* The distribution method is usually inadequate. Would the average teacher like to see something important being delivered to their house by a seven year old child?

If schools are serious about communicating curriculum information to parents, then other procedures are necessary. Once again, the school's desire to share curriculum information should be used as a valuable opportunity to involve parents, and to find out about their needs.

The development of community resource people is an effective way to achieve widespread awareness of curriculum initiatives. These people can be involved initially in the following ways:

* As participants in inservice activities planned for staff.
* As part of a literacy curriculum sub-committee set up within the school.
* As part of specific activities that relate to curriculum initiatives. For example, a publishing company, purchasing early reading material, planning the MS Readathon, co-ordinating entries into writing

competitions, compiling school writing anthologies, or planning literacy enrichment activities for talented children .

While only small numbers of parents can be involved in this way, ideally they can then be used as resource people in other contexts. For example, parents can report to P&C meetings, or parent/teacher nights.

c) Classroom Information

While it is possible to provide written details on classroom literacy programmes and practices, one of the most effective ways to keep non-daytime working parents informed is to invite them to visit classrooms to observe curriculum initiatives in action. The following are just some of the ideas that you might use:

* Ask parents to visit the classroom in Kindergarten to observe a predictable shared reading session. Provide them with a handout prior to the session with a list of key points to note as they observe (See Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here
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* Ask parents to visit your classroom to observe a writing session. Prior to the session provide a single page handout that explains what the children will be doing during the session. As well, provide them with several things to observe (See Figure 3).

Figure 3 about here

While parents who are not free during school hours are more difficult to involve, it is still possible to provide similar activities to the above at other hours. Small groups of children can by arrangement attend school at other times (e.g. 5.30-6.30pm) to allow the same observational strategies to be used. Alternatively, video material can be used to allow specific literacy practices to be observed. Given the widespread use of video cameras in schools it may even be possible to video one of your own lessons. The advantage of the latter is that parents have the opportunity to observe their own children, something that all parents find interesting.

d) Student feedback

All parents want feedback concerning their children's progress. Sadly, little specific feedback is given. In some schools the half yearly and yearly reports are almost all that is offered. One of the problems with such feedback is that it is so infrequent, and provides little practical or specific information. Parents need to be involved in the process of feedback, using genuine two way communication. Some of the strategies that have proven useful are as follows:

*** Classroom participation**

Strategies like those described above under the heading "Classroom Information" are also useful because they provide parents with valuable opportunities to see their children participating in learning with other children. While this at times can lead to the negative consequences of parental comparisons between students, if handled sensitively, they are a powerful way to allow parents to learn how their children are coping with the demands of schooling.

*** Portfolios**

Another important form of feedback is the use of Portfolios. While at times simply sending home students' school books is useful, a more systematic approach to the sharing of student work is preferable. One procedure for using Portfolios is outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4 about here
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e) Parental support of their children

This final category is the most demanding, but ultimately the most rewarding. The most vital form of parent participation is involvement in the specific literacy activities of children. There have been many attempts to develop innovative parent participation programmes, one of which is the Talk to a Literacy Learner programme, or TTALL (see Cairney & Munsie, 1992a).

In a sense it does not matter how you involve parents in their children's literacy development, as long as the following points are observed:

* Parents must not be involved simply to fulfil the school's purposes.
* The starting point for parent programmes must be a sense of partnership, of accepting that each has much to learn from the other.
* The over-riding purpose must be to bring about positive literacy benefits for children.
* All strategies must consider the needs of parents.
* All initiatives should lead parents to assume greater involvement in their children's learning.
* Wherever possible, parent expertise and knowledge should be utilized.

Given these basic principles, there are many starting points for parent involvement in the support of their children. Each of these initiatives represents one way to take a first step towards significant partnership programmes. It is my belief that from these simple beginnings can emerge genuine partnership which ultimately will lead to the initiation of contacts by parents, not just the school. The following are just some of the starting points that I have found successful.

4. MOVING BEYOND FIRST STEPS

As outlined already, the ideas shared are seen as just some of the ways to initiate the first in parent partnership. These initial activities rather than being seen as ends in themselves are meant to be the starting point of significant parent/school partnerships

Parent involvement has been widely acclaimed as an essential part of the solution to educational inequalities between various social groups. The goal of many educators has been to provide educational opportunities for disempowered members of our community. But the intent of this emphasis on parent involvement must not simply be an attempt to retrain parents. We need fundamental changes in the way schools and their parents relate to one another (Smrekar, 1992).

There is growing evidence concerning the impact of parent involvement initiatives. Evaluations like that conducted for the TTALL program have consistently shown that parent attitudes towards school, themselves, teachers, and their role as parents are enhanced (Becher, 1986; Cairney & Munsie, 1992b), that teachers benefit (Epstein, 1983) and that student achievement increases (Cairney & Munsie, 1992b).

Initiatives like TTALL are attempting to provide practical strategies for parents. They are also an attempt to build community networks in which parents and teachers provide mutual support for the learning of children.

This sense of community is important. Indeed the success of programmes like TTALL has probably been due as much to the development of community support networks as it has been due to the quality of the programme. My suspicion is that any number of programs could be successful if they follow some basic guiding principles. It is important to outline these principles, which relate to four main variables concerning parent initiatives; content, process, source and control.

The CONTENT of programmes should:

* cover learning, reading and writing;
* provide knowledge and strategies readily applicable to parents and their children;
* be child centred;
* provide a special focus on the way parents interact with their children as they read and write.

My work has suggested that the most effective PROCESS for parent learning is:

* parent centred;
* experience based;

* centred around practical demonstrations of patterns of interaction with children;
* focussed on parent interaction, sharing and reflection;
* one that allows parents to grow in knowledge of each other;
* spread over a period of at least 3 months;
* supported by home tasks designed to encourage parents to interact with their children as they read and write.

It is my belief that where possible the SOURCE of initiatives should be parents themselves. However, in the first instance schools may need to look for strategies which will lead to parent/school interaction. This is best achieved by:

* getting to know your parents and community well; .
* attempting to ascertain their needs and educational expectations;
* providing a range of initial contact initiatives.

Experience suggests that all people learn best when they feel some sense of CONTROL of their learning. Parents are no exception. In order to achieve this I would suggest that all parent programmes:

* are developed in consultation with parents;
* should be constantly adapted to suit parent needs;
* should be community based, not simply school based.

5. GETTING STARTED

Armed with the above principles how can schools (or groups of interested parents) begin the process of developing parent/school partnerships. Before outlining what I see as a logical series of actions designed to bring about change, it is important to stress that these steps are not necessarily pursued in a lock step fashion. As part of this process you may need to return to previous steps rather than simply moving on (see Figure 5). As well, it is important to remember that some schools will need to spend more time on some stages than others. Above all, remember that the whole process will take time!

Figure 5 about here

STEP 1 - Establish Community Expectations for Literacy

This can involve the use of parent entry interviews, parent home based interviews, or even written surveys. The essential ingredient is the need to seek community views and expectations.

STEP 2 - Have staff examine assumptions concerning parent involvement

This is an essential step and will require staff to examine their current practices, read some of the literature on parent involvement, and discuss the critical issues as a staff.

STEP 3 - Find a starting point

Once basic practices and community needs are established it is important to seek a starting point. This may simply be the introduction of a strategy like Paired Reading, could involve a carefully planned programme for home based reading, or perhaps involve a series of parent workshops.

STEP 4 - Sell the concept to the community

After a starting point has been established it is important to promote the initiatives to all members of the school community. Local media, newsletters, and direct mail may be used.

STEP 5 - Evaluate the project

A final and critical part of the Home/School programmes is to constantly evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the initiatives. The following questions might help to focus your evaluation:

- Are parents involved? What is the level of parent involvement?
- Are parents gaining new knowledge about literacy?
- Are parents gaining new knowledge about schooling?
- Are parents gaining increased insight into their own children as literacy learners?
- Are teachers gaining new knowledge about students as readers, writers and learners?
- Are teachers gaining new insights into the needs of the community they serve?
- Are the initiatives having an impact on student attitudes to and achievement in literacy?
- Are home/school barriers being broken down?
- Have parent and teacher attitudes towards each other changed?
- Have there been any other benefits?

6. CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this paper to challenge some of the accepted wisdom concerning parent involvement in education, and have outlined some of the possibilities available for parent involvement. While I am encouraged by the many attempts that are being made by schools throughout Australia to involve parents as partners in education, I believe much more needs to be done.

There are many ways to involve parents, but so often these initiatives do not go far enough. As educators we regularly acknowledge that parents have a vital role to play in their children's literacy education. Now we need to remind ourselves of this fact so that we will strive for more meaningful relationships with our communities.

As the title of my paper suggests I believe that far too often our efforts to work with parents have left them in the position of silent partners. Schools have been the domain of teachers, and opportunities for parental involvement have been little more than token efforts (Cairney & Munsie, In Press). Parent involvement is important not just to allow parents and their children to change and learn, but also to facilitate changes in schools and teachers that will enable them to be more responsive to community needs.

The key is that we must strive to move beyond the token involvement of parents. If children are all to be given equal opportunity to use literacy for self empowerment, then this is an imperative. It is only when we move beyond tokenism that parents can truly become partners with schools in children's literacy development (Cairney & Munsie, In Press).

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Figure 1: Initiatives for parent participation

CONTENT	PROCESS: Written Communication	PROCESS: Workshops/Meetings	PROCESS: Participation Programmes
School Policies & Procedures	• School information booklets for new enrolees • School suggestions concerning home reading	• Discussion of school policies at P & C meetings • Description of school procedures at parent information nights	Involvement of parents in policy formulations - discipline - library Procedures - parent involvement
Curriculum Information	• School policies on spelling, grammar etc • Description of schemes adopted for reading • Information sheets on new curricula • Extracts from curriculum documents	• Workshops on 'Process Writing' • Demonstration of Paired Reading • Workshop on editing children's writing	Involvement of parents in - literacy Inservice initiatives - school curriculum planning
Classroom Information	• Description of procedures for homework • Home reading guide • Editing checklists • Ideas for research writing	• Parent/Teacher meetings on: - Reading methods - Place of spelling in classroom - Class writing publication programming • Parent workshop on research writing.	• Parents as reading partners • Parent involvement in writing conferences • Parents as resource people sharing insights about their use of literacy
Student Feedback	• School reports • Portfolios of work • Classroom publications • Class and school newsletters.	• Parent/Teacher discussions • Parent interviews • Parent meeting on school reporting procedures	• Observation of children in classrooms • Parents as reading partners • Parent involvement in writing conferences • Parent assistance with research work
Parental Support of their Children	• Parent leaflets on literacy - How to read to your child - Responding to your child's writing - What about grammar • Information on listening and talking to your child	• Workshops on: - reading to your child - listening to your child - responding to your child's writing - using the library - computer literacy • Visiting experts on issues of relevance (P & C and Parent/Teacher meetings)	• Workshops on using "paired reading" • Observation of skilled use of writing conferences • Strucutred parent involvement programmes (eg TTALL)

Figure 2: A sample set of observational instructions for parents visiting a Kindergarten classroom

While you are in the classroom watch for the following things:

+ Notice how the children are encouraged to think about the meaning of the story (title, illustrations etc) prior to the reading.

+ Take note of the way the children are encouraged to read the predictable parts of the text.

+ Observe the way the teacher points to the print to reinforce that words convey meaning.

+ Notice how important the illustrations are to help children understand the text.

+ Notice the questions the teacher asks about the book during and after the reading.

Figure 3: Sample writing observation checklist for a school visit

My aim as a teacher is to help your child develop as a writer. I want him/her to be able to use writing for a variety of purposes. This means that they need to learn how to:

- organise their ideas;
- choose the right form to write it in;
- collect ideas and information if needed;
- revise their work;
- present it in an appropriate form for their readers.

In the lesson you will observe children involved in one of the following stages of the writing process:

- Organising their ideas for draft writing.
- Writing draft material.
- Working out the form their writing will take.
- Revising their work.
- Talking to other people about their writing prior to revision.
- Editing their work by checking spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Preparing the final product.

Please try to find time to observe:

- What activity your child is involved in.
- How I as the teacher support the writers in the room.

In particular, take note of the questions I ask and the information I give them.

Figure 4: One alternative for the use of portfolios

The following is just one set of suggestions for involving parents in portfolio assessment.

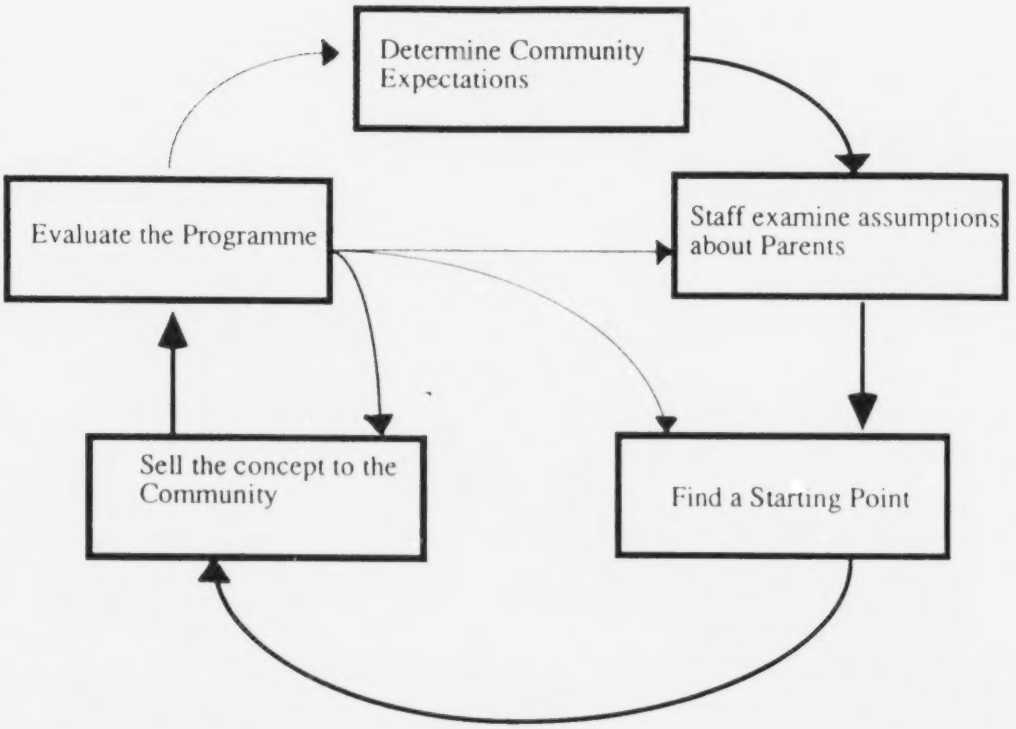
Step 1 - Prepare a list of literacy work to be taken home. This might include examples of narrative writing (draft material as well as the final product), samples of writing from other subjects, (e.g. a report from science, notes made on a video), a list of frequently misspelt words, a text that the child has chosen to read to his/her parents, a list of books reads up to this point in time.

Step 2 - With each child's involvement prepare the portfolios. Explain the purpose of the work sample to the students.

Step 3 - Send the Work Sample home with its purpose outlined as well as procedures for parents to follow up any of the material included.

Step 4 - Provide time for parents to visit the school to discuss the Work Sample.

Figure 5: Cyclical representation of the planning process for increasing parent participation


Determine Community Expectations
Staff examine assumptions about Parents
Find a Starting Point
Sell the concept to the Community
Evaluate the Programme